

March 16, 2000

*(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts)*

RINPOCHE GYATSO: Respected Chairman of the Commission and members of the Commission, I am very honored to be addressing this Commission set up by the United States government on religious policy, specially because this is the first time to be speaking. I've learned to read out my small testimony at this session; but thereafter the conclusion, when there are questions, I will seek help of my interpreter to translate from Tibetan to English.

(IN ENGLISH) Dear Chairman and committee members, I am pleased to give you information about the religious freedom for Tibet, the Buddhist in Tibet. I will be pleased to answer your questions later. Since my English is not yet good, I will rather have the questions in Tibetan through my translator.

My name is Ajia Lousang Tubten Juimai Gyatso. I am the abbot of the Kumbum Monastery in Tibet. I have also held many political positions at the central and provincial level. I am now in the United States. I would like to explain to you why I had to leave Tibet.

In recent years in Tibet, some of the conditions of the Chinese rule remind me of time of the cultural revolution. During those terrible years our monasteries were closed and monks were forced to work as laymen in the fields; we were forced to do some things against our wishes and to say things we did not believe.

Since 1997 government officials have lived in our monasteries and are imposing education in socialism on our monks. Most important, we were forced to publically denounce His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who is our spiritual leader. This is extremely difficult for us because to criticize His Holiness is a sin in our religion. Under these conditions, if I obeyed government, I could

save my monastery; but I have to go against my religion. Therefore, I could no longer be a true leader to our monastery.

One very important reason why I had to leave Tibet was because of our beliefs about the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama. Next to the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama is the most important spiritual leader in Tibetan Buddhism. Historically, it has been an important part of our traditions to have the Panchen Lama's reincarnation chosen by the Dalai Lama, and that the Dalai Lama's reincarnation be chosen by the Panchen Lama.

When the tenth Panchen Lama died in 1989, the government said we could follow our tradition and ask His Holiness about his nominee for the Panchen Lama's reincarnation. They said they would consider the Dalai Lama's ideas. The Tibetan people were very happy with these news, and we hoped that in the end, true Panchen Lama would be found. But years passed and our leaders were not allowed to communicate with the Dalai Lama in India. Then when the leader of our group Chadrel Rinpoche did communicate with the Dalai Lama, our entire committee of High Lamas was called to Beijing for an emergency meeting.

We were told we must publically denounce Chadrel Rinpoche's actions. Chadrel Rinpoche was charged with treason and imprisoned for six years for collaborating with the Dalai Lama. The boy that the Dalai Lama identified as the new Panchen Lama was removed from consideration and was not heard from again.

I was then forced to recognize the Chinese government's choice of the eleventh Panchen Lama. I knew he was not the true reincarnation. I knew this was extremely difficult for me, and I could not be silent. So I asked the government to free Chadrel Rinpoche and keep the Dalai Lama's true Panchen Lama. I was told I must obey and show my loyalty to the Chinese government. As abbot of Kumbum Monastery, I would have been forced to help the government have its choice of the Panchen Lama accepted by the Tibetan people. This would violate my deepest beliefs. It was at this point that I knew I must leave my country and my monastery.

As you know, the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan people, has been exiled in India since 1959 when he was forced to leave Tibet. Throughout the early '60's, there was much strife between Tibet and China, especially on the issue of religious freedom. There was much suffering and deaths for both the Chinese and Tibetan people.

During the cultural revolution and many years, our culture was completely oppressed. The situation began to improve beginning in 80. We did not have true religious freedom, but the government's policy did ease. For the first time since the Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet, a group of his representatives was able to visit Tibet. The tenth Panchen Lama and many prisoners were released. Some monasteries reopened and some monks were allowed to return to the practice of our religion. Our monastery even received some money for the renovations. Tibetans hoped for more positive changes.

And, unfortunately, in recent years the execution of the Chinese religious policies in some areas of Tibet has created fear that Tibet may be returning to the terrible years of the cultural revolution. If I had to stay in Tibet in order to uphold my loyalty to their government, I would have had to help to do some things and say some things that went against my religion. Instead, I chose to follow my teacher's guidance. My teacher told me when I turn 50 years old, I should leave political life and concentrate on my religious studies.

In conclusion, when I was a boy, I led a lonely life for my future and my teachers and my assistants, who were put into prison, and our monastery was closed. As a young man, I worked hard in the fields as a forced laborer and was unable to follow my calling as a monk. As a grown man, even with the power and good fortune my position with my government afforded me, I was forced to say things and do things that were painful to my spirit.

I did these things for a time because this was the only way I saw to serve our people and to preserve our religious traditions. But under Chinese rule, many of our people suffering because they are not completely free to practice our religion and to uphold all of our traditions. I could not remain under these conditions. I have to leave.

Like all government, the Chinese government is full of many good people and some would like to see positive changes. China's constitution states that all people have the right to choose their religion, but there are no laws that guarantee us right, which is subject to the game of the policymakers who often deny and abuse this right. It is my urgent wish that the Chinese government will make laws that protect the right to religious freedom.

It is my belief that His Holiness the Dalai Lama would return to our country for the benefit of the Chinese and the Tibetan people. I want to, wherever I can, to help preserve the Tibetan Buddhism. I accepted this invitation because it is time for me to begin telling the truth for my own story so that I can help our people in ways that are available in America.

Thank you very much for your invitation to speak to you.